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Introducing the Cultural Ego for Counselling Immigrants and Local Students in Secondary and Adult Educational Settings

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Abstract

The concept of the 'Cultural Ego' was first put forth by Sow (1977) and further developed by Terranova-Cecchini (1991) based on clinical work done in Italy and non-Western countries. It has its foundation in anthropology, neuroscience, psychiatry and psychology (Devereux, 1956), (Linton, 1956), (Sow, 1977), (Berry, 1992), (Kandel, 2006), (Kaes, 2007).

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to show how the Cultural Ego can be adapted for use in secondary and adult education counselling situations.

Sources of Evidence: The Cultural Ego as an instrument of transcultural psychiatric therapy that has been used for more than 30 years in Italy by Fondazione Cecchini Pace, Milan (www.fondazionececchinipace.it).

Main Argument: The Cultural Ego (universal) is composed of three axes: family, community and ancestral. Cultural Ego therapy helps the patient reconstruct the axes (Terranova-Cecchini, 1991).

Counsellors, international program directors, social workers will find a working knowledge of the Cultural Ego useful in assisting their target populations.

Conclusion: Due its success in the transcultural therapy field, the authors have decided to share it with school counselling professionals. It is especially useful for youths who are torn between their family and school cultures. It may be useful in anti-bullying programs because often inner cultural conflicts create bullies. The concept of the Cultural Ego is applicable not just to immigrants but also members of the dominant culture.

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Keywords: transcultural, intercultural, immigration, migration, counselling, therapy, Cultural Ego

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to suggest the introduction and use of the *Cultural Ego Identikit Diagnostic Tool* in the school system. Because of its success as both a diagnostic tool and method of building cultural awareness, the authors propose its use in the school system. It can be considered as an early intervention tool for intercepting student problems before they escalate; if used early enough it can assist most students whose problems have their origin in the cultural adjustment process. It can also help them build self-esteem and consequently improve academic achievement. It is not meant to be a substitute for professional therapy when the need is present but it can

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be a useful tool for preliminary intervention. It is necessary to define the term ‘**transcultural**’ as it applies to psychotherapy and for the purposes of discussion in this work. **Transcultural** is defined as going beyond culture as an individually defined phenomenon. It is based on the “profound consciousness that human beings distinguish themselves from other living creatures by their capacity to create culture, they could not have survived if they had not created the framework of culture” (Devereux 1973). The therapist cannot be an expert in every culture so it is important to be conscious of the fact that all humans carry culture deep within their psyche. The word ‘trans’ indicates a bilateral movement of both the patient and the therapist towards each other (Terranova-Cecchini, 2003). Applied in a school setting, it means that the counsellor and student metaphorically ‘move’ towards each other.

Method
The concept of the Cultural Ego was developed by psychiatrist-neurologist Dr. Rosalba Terranova-Cecchini. It has been used in transcultural therapy in Milan and other places in Italy for more than 30 years. It was also used in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Madagascar and Nepal during international cooperation projects. The Cultural Ego is based on the work of Ibrahima Sow (1977) who did extensive research on the African ego as applied in the field of ethnopsychiatry. The following diagram illustrates the Cultural Ego.

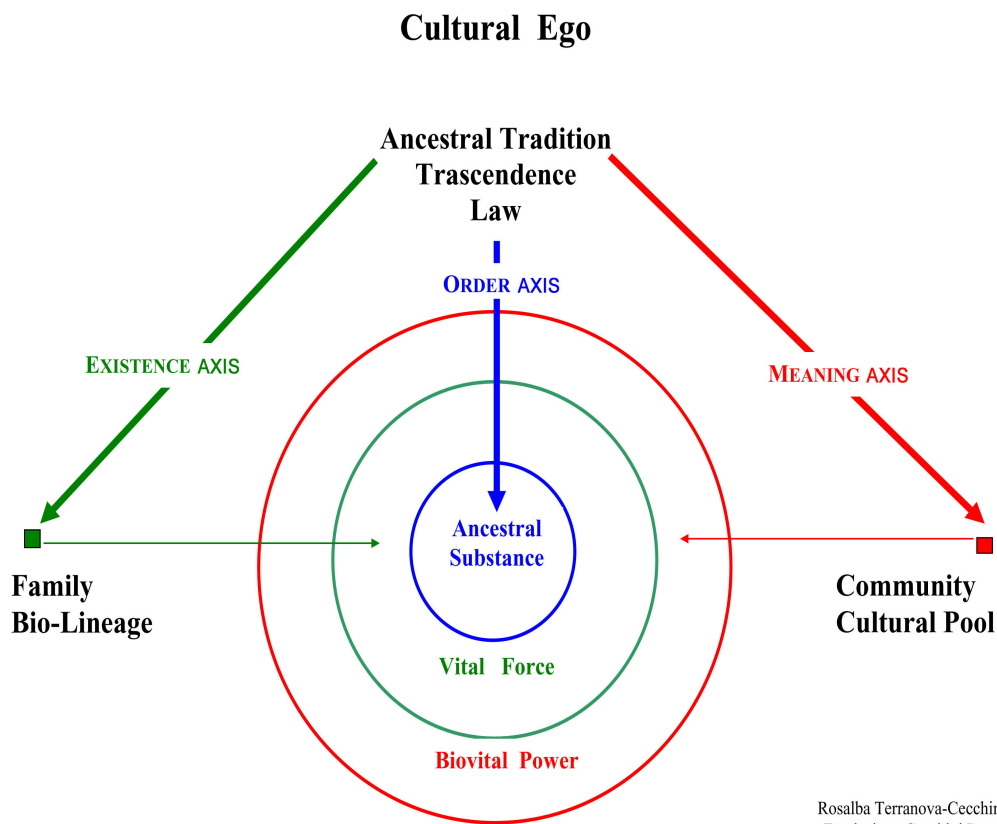


Figure 1. Cultural Ego

2.1 Explanation of the Cultural Ego

The content of these functions comes from tradition created by the Ancestor. The Ancestor is specific to every culture (Founding Ancestor). Sow's research demonstrated the areas of links and traditions along the axes. For example the Order Axis is embedded in implicit memory and functions in the unconscious. This Unconscious is called the 'Ancestral Substance' by Sow (1977.) The Existence Axis is based on family and biological heritage. The Meaning Axis is based on the relationships that exist within the culture or community. In applying this theory to the school situation, it can be noted that if any of these axes (bonds) are disrupted, there is a total disorientation in the mind of the students. They find themselves in a conflicting situation: Should they follow the law of the Ancestor or that of the new culture?

The **Existence Axis** brings tradition into the family, defining the line of descent of the individual. The family teaches the child from birth until he/she attends school. The disruption or breakage of this axis (going to school in the new country) disrupts the teaching received from the family of origin. The cultural competence given by the parents is dramatically un-useable for the young person in the new culture. The **Meaning Axis** is based on the relationships that exist within the culture or community. It brings the objects and institutions that represent the original culture of the parents into the community (village). These institutions and objects do not exist in the new culture so the child must get used to the new institutions and objects that represent the culture of the new society that he has found himself in.

This is very difficult for a young person because his family continues to teach him in his original culture, with its food, clothes, practices, rituals, hygiene, religion etc. Then he/she must go out and be bombarded by all the cultural artefacts and institutions that go with the new country.

The three axes guide the behaviour of the young person. Cultural behaviour originates from the unconscious, and is carried by the 'culture-type' (member of a particular culture). When the student arrives in the school, he is no longer able to draw strength from the family. This causes serious problems because problem solving depends on the vital force, which comes from interaction with the physical environment. The ancestral substance of the unconscious allows us to understand why a young Muslim woman in a western country wears the veil which is an important symbol for her 'culture-type'. The Hindu's refusal to eat beef is not about being particular about food, it comes from the ancestral substance. Cultural values are located in the ancestral substance---given by the family, reinforced by the community and loaded into the ancestral substance.

2.2 Application of the Cultural Ego to students

Knowledge of the Cultural Ego and how it functions can assist in the recognition of student problems and guide intervention plans. The Cultural Ego concept has assisted patients with various difficulties. Many problems can be identified and solved using the concept of the Cultural Ego and can be useful for teachers and counsellors. Common school behaviour problems such as fighting, poor peer relationships and isolation can be linked to a disruption of the Meaning Axis; problems with bullying (receiving end) can be linked to a disruption of the Existence Axis; bullying others can be linked to a disruption in the Order Axis (Terranova-Cecchini 1992,2010).

2.3 Simplified Version of the Cultural Ego- use of Cultural Identikit for schools

What may seem so obvious to the psychiatrist or clinical psychologist may not be so apparent to the school psychologist or counsellor who has not studied cultural psychology. The counsellor must recognize the intercultural problems of the student, and act as mediator between the student, school and family. It is important to point out that to have a counselling service already instituted in primary schools is advisable to prevent bigger problems in secondary school. Teachers are indispensable for detecting students' problems and should be included on an intervention team along with the counsellor. Training both teachers and counsellors about the use of the Cultural Ego Identikit will be beneficial for early intervention and proper assistance.

The following is a simplified protocol for applying the Cultural Ego Diagnostic Tool in the school. Students are identified as 'at risk' when they first enrol. They are immediately interviewed with the Identikit Diagnostic Tool. Ongoing communication between teachers and counsellors and other personnel is extremely important. Teachers should be informed immediately of the results. Some student problems can be identified by using the axes of the Cultural Ego as presented in the Identikit. Personnel must be trained in intercultural competence at least to the point where they are able to recognize that behaviour is culturally bound. Personnel must be able to avoid judgement on behaviours and open enough to reflect on the cultural reasons for a given behaviour.

2.4 Use of the Cultural Ego Identikit

Application: the counsellor recognizes the student's problem by using the questioning techniques in Cultural Ego Identikit. (see appendix)

After problems have been identified according to the Cultural Ego Identikit, the counsellor meets with the student's teacher and explains the issues; together an action plan is implemented to assist the student. The decision to bring in the family depends on many factors, including previous familial reactions to school communication. If it seems that bringing in the family causes more harm than good, it is better not to involve them (i.e. a family whose culture highly values compliance at school may impose unnecessary physical punishment on the student). The students are helped to come to terms with their conflicts. This can be done in various ways, from one-to one counselling, to small group work, special assignments, and so forth. The conflicts eventually can be minimized. If not, outside professional help should be sought. Often just affirmation and acceptance of where the students are and how they feel can empower them to overcome their problems.

2. Tables

The following table provides a blank Identikit Form.

Table 1. Identikit Form (Blank)

..... File n°..... Date

ETHNOS Name :		Culture: . <input type="checkbox"/> St. <input type="checkbox"/> Me. <input type="checkbox"/>	
F <input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> followup: 1st interview <input type="checkbox"/> 2nd interview <input type="checkbox"/> after ___ session <input type="checkbox"/>			
	T	M	A
Name			
Epos			
Place of birth			
Topos			

<i>Age – married, etc.</i>				
<i>Cultural Identity</i>				
<i>Siblings</i>				
<i>Genos</i>				
<i>Language - dialect</i>				
<i>Logos</i>				
<i>Mobility</i>				
<i>Transcultural process</i>				
<i>Family mobility</i>				
<i>Transcultural process</i>				
<i>Time living in present country</i>				
<i>Cultural network</i>				
<i>Relatives living with person</i>				
<i>Cultural transmission</i>				
<i>Education</i>				
<i>cultural model</i>				
<i>Work</i>				
<i>Cultural network</i>				
<i>health-illness</i>				
<i>explanatory models</i>				
<i>Religion</i>				
<i>Ethos</i>				
<i>Observation</i>				
<i>Symbols</i>				
TOTAL				<div>Cultural Ego</div> <div>T.</div> <div>M.</div> <div>A.</div> <div>TR.</div>

*Case characteristics and cultural grid:**Notes:*

Taken from Terranova-Cecchini R., Tognetti Bordogna M., *Migrare, Guida per gli operatori dei servizi sociali, sanitari e d'accoglienza*, F. Angeli, Milano, 1992, modificato da Terranova-Cecchini R., 2010.

The following table provides an interpretation of each section of the Identikit.

Table 2. Identikit Form (Explanation)

..... File n°..... Date

ETHNOS Name : _____ Culture: . <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> St. <input type="checkbox"/> Me <input type="checkbox"/>			
F <input type="checkbox"/> M <input type="checkbox"/> T <input type="checkbox"/> ; followup: 1st interview <input type="checkbox"/> 2nd interview <input type="checkbox"/> after ____ session <input type="checkbox"/>			
	T	M	A <i>Personal data, explanatory notes, essential life story.</i>
<i>Name</i>			<i>The name can belong to someone important, heroic, successful, etc.</i>
<i>Epos</i>			<i>of the family. (T) Or a name in fashion (M) or adapted to the culture/old culture (A)</i>
<i>Place of birth</i>			<i>Geographic place, characterized by aspirations, objects, legends, etc,</i>
<i>Topos</i>			
<i>Age – married, etc.</i>			<i>Identity, number of years in home culture, type of marriage, forms cultural identity</i>
<i>cultural identity</i>			
<i>Siblings</i>			<i>Number of siblings, birth order, cultural birth order, names of siblings, importance of birth order, symbolic importance</i>
<i>Genos</i>			
<i>Language - dialect</i>			<i>Identification with dialect, persistence in the first language, mixed with the new language, indicates strong connections to the culture of origin</i>
<i>Logos</i>			
<i>Mobility</i>			<i>How many places lived in, countries visited, if more movement, means better possibility of being transcultural</i>
<i>Transcultural process</i>			
<i>Family mobility</i>			<i>Family transmits the culture; if there has been experience of various cultures the family will transmit a transcultural openness</i>

Transcultural process								
<i>Time living in present country</i>				<i>Long time living in the new country favours adaptation, minimizes problems</i>				
Cultural network								
<i>Relatives living with person</i>				<i>Extended family favours transmission of the original culture; if subject has received traditional schooling, the culture is strongly embedded.</i>				
Cultural transmission								
<i>Education</i>				<i>Education reinforces the cultural model already transmitted to the children by the family and the community.</i>				
Cultural model								
<i>Work</i>				<i>If subject works with family or cultural group, there is an influence.</i>				
Cultural network								
<i>Health-illness</i>				<i>The way subject explains cause of illness, it is usually more cultural than scientific.</i>				
Explanatory models								
<i>Religion</i>				<i>Type of religion strongly configures the cultural identity.</i>				
Ethos								
<i>Observation</i>				<i>Hair style, clothes, jewellery, tattoos, makeup, etc. are strong cultural symbol.s</i>				
Symbols								
<i>TOTAL</i>				Cultural Ego	T.	M.	A.	TR.

Case characteristics and cultural grid:

Notes:

Taken from Terranova-Cecchini R., Tognetti Bordogna M., *Migrare, Guida per gli operatori dei servizi sociali, sanitari e d'accoglienza*, F. Angeli, Milano, 1992, modificato da Terranova-Cecchini R., 2010.

How to interpret the Cultural Ego Identikit:

Acculturation is a negative factor and has a negative weight. When 'A' is present the subject is not well-adjusted. The following scale assists in identifying the subject's ego type.

If $T > M$ with no A = Traditional Ego

If $T > M$ with A = Acculturated Ego

If $M > T$ with no A = Modernized Ego

If M is $> T$ with A = Acculturated Ego

If $T = M$ are equal or very close and there is no A = Transcultural Ego

An ego that is well adapted to change and therefore able to adjust to a new culture must present either T or M: if however M has a much higher score than T (there are many more M than T) there is the risk of social difficulties (social anguish, narcissism, violence).

If an A is present the subject has not adapted but has acculturated.

If T is very high there is risk that the ego will be so attached to tradition that it will not be able to adapt to the new culture.

The Identikit form has space to write recommendations for the counselor. The spaces are indicated as 'case characteristics' and its and with 'operational notes'. It is important to note that much of the information written is subject to interpretation on the part of the counsellor based on training and experience.

3. Results

The following cases demonstrate the effective use and results of the Cultural Ego Identikit in the Italian school system (Terranova-Cecchini, 2010).

Luis, an 11 year old boy from Ecuador, had problems concentrating in class and was hostile to his teacher. He was rude, wouldn't stay in his seat, and stole small things from the other students. After being interviewed with the Identikit, it came out that he had lived in several different countries including Spain, U.S.A. and Italy, due to his mother's multiple marriages. It was found that there was a disruption in the Order Axis: he had no clear Ancestral Law. Intervention consisted of talking to him, helping him to recognize and value his country of origin, Ecuador. After several sessions he started demonstrating respect towards his teacher and began to pay more attention in class. Reconstructing the Order Axis and coming into contact with his cultural rules and hence the Ancestral Law made him feel better and his behaviour and academic achievement improved remarkably.

Editehe, a 14 year old girl from Burkina Faso, had problems answering questions and participating in class. She always wore the traditional clothes of her country. With the Identikit it came out that her peers made fun of her clothes. Consequently she was reluctant to speak out in class and froze up when the teacher called on her. There was a disruption of the Meaning Axis. She was holding on tightly to her home culture and it was revealed through her choice in clothes. After some counselling she concluded that the students didn't understand her culture and that she should try to adjust her style to fit in better. This was accomplished by the counsellor without forcing her to abandon her culture; it was a choice she made on her own. After she began wearing Western clothes, she gradually gained confidence in participating and answering questions at school and her peer relations improved. This was an example of transcultural change-a conscious choice to take on the new culture's clothing norms.

Lucas, aged 15 from Peru, demonstrated a significant behaviour change when he changed countries. He began staying out late, taking drugs, associating with undesirable people. Things came to a head when he hit a student in school and was suspended. It was found that he felt alienated and insecure due to the fact he looked physically different from the students and he was embarrassed about his accent and his parents. There was a strong disruption in the Meaning Axis as well as the Order Axis. He was trying desperately to find a group of people he could relate to; this put him at risk for gang involvement but fortunately after changing his class and counselling he started playing football on a team and he began making friends.

Liu Wa, a 13 year old boy from China, was in middle school. He was very anxious, unable to pay attention, agitated and insecure. Use of the Identikit brought out that he was very stressed. He demonstrated a disruption in the Existence Axis because he had some problems with his parents' expectations. When the parents were brought in they discussed their Confucian principles: students needed to work hard and be successful in school. When Lin Wa brought home bad marks, they punished him physically by hitting him. The counsellor explained the concept of culture, the trauma of changing culture, and asked them to stop punishing him physically for bad academic performance. They complied and Lin Wa's performance improved dramatically.

The preceding cases are just a few examples of how the Cultural Ego Identikit helped to identify a student's problem and recommend possible intervention which turned out to be effective. Training school counsellors and teachers in the school system to be aware of students' cultural adjustment problems can be very beneficial both for individuals and the entire school. Teachers and counsellors who are culturally aware and culturally sensitive will be able to avert or minimize many students' problems while assisting them with the difficult process of cultural adjustment. This in turn should have a positive impact on student academic performance and general well-being, as well as encourage students to successfully complete their education process.

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